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ABSTRACT

Summarized are findings from an investigation of Swedish parents, who were studied to discover barriers to fathers taking time off from work to care for a newborn. Discussion focuses on: (1) fathers' participation in parental leave; (2) parents who take leave, and why; (3) barriers to fathers' participation in parental leave; (4) the potential of social policy for effecting sex-role changes; and (5) prospects for the future. In summary, the Swedish experience suggests that traditional exclusion of men from child care is highly resistant to change. Policymakers can give men opportunities to participate more in child care from the very beginning of their child's life, but many will not take advantage of such opportunities. While some structural obstacles to leave-taking appear to exist in the form of inflexible jobs, intolerant employers, and restrictions on income compensation, adherence to traditional sex-role attitudes seems to be an even more important reason why mothers remain responsible for child care in Sweden. Clearly, it is not just men who are content with the status quo, but women too are still most comfortable with a situation in which they are the ones primarily responsible for child care. The sexual division of labor is likely to persist in post-industrial societies for some time to come. (RH)

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FATHERS' PARTICIPATION IN PARENTAL LEAVE

By Linda Haas

This report summarizes findings from a recent study of Swedish parents, where one of the goals was to discover the barriers to fathers taking time off from work to care for a newborn. The study was funded by the American-Scandinavian Foundation and Indiana University and took place during 1985-1986.

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Up to now, in every known society, women have had primary responsibility for the physical care and emotional well-being of infants and toddlers, while the male contribution has been mainly economic. Quite recently, there have been some murmurs of discontent concerning exclusion of men from active participation in the care of small children. A few childrearing experts have begun to advocate equal parenting for the benefit of children, who are perceived as thriving best when they have the care and attention of two parents, multiple role models, and the varied styles of interaction mothers and fathers have to offer. Some radical-thinking men, unhappy whith the confines of the traditional male role, encourage men to participate in childcare also because it would help them develop more well-rounded personalities and avoid destructive overinvolvement in the competitive occupational world. Some feminists, on the other hand advocate participation by fathers in infant care for the benefit of women, who would thus be freer to pursue self-fulfillment outside the home.

Sweden is the only contemporary society where policymakers advocate equal participation of fathers in childcare. Swedish interest in equal parenthood dates back twenty-five years, when the double role of women as worker and housewife/mother was criticized as unjust. This position quickly gained ascendance in the government dominated by Social Democrats - partly because of the need for female labor in a growing economy and partly because of the influence wielded by a relatively large number of women in political life. In 1968, the Swedish government prepared a report for the United Nations which outlined its sex-role policy; in it, it was stated that men were to be equally responsible for housework and childcare, while women were to be held equally accountable for the economic support of families. In 1979, the family law of Sweden was amended to specify clearly that spouses should share breadwinning and all domestic responsibilities.

To achieve equal parenthood, many social programs were developed. Perhaps the most important of these is parental leave - one year off with pay which new mothers or fathers can use to stay home to take care of a newborn baby. Parents cannot take leave simultaneously, although partners can take leave concurrently, on an alternating part-time basis.

A study of this unique social program allows an exploration into many interesting questions related to fathers and mothers sharing responsibilities for baby care. Among these are:

1. Given the opportunity, will fathers elect to stay home from work to care for their babies?

2. What types of fathers are more likely than others to take parental leave?

3. What seem to be the barriers to more men electing to stay home for childcare purposes?

4. Can social policy be used effectively for eliminating the sexual division of labor for childcare?

5. What prospects are there for the future that Swedish fathers will become equal participants in infant care?

<u>Fathers' participation in parental leave</u>

Do Swedish fathers take advantage of the parental leave program to stay home from work after childbirth? According to a recent report by the Central Bureau of Statistics in Stockholm, only 27% of all fathers whose wives were in the labor market before childbirth took even one day of parental leave, for children born in 1982. Those who took leave took an average of only 49 days.

More recent data are available from a 1986 survey of a representative sample of 319 sets of Gothenburg parents. This group included parents who were cohabiting as well as those who were married; both partners had been employed before the arrival of their child in 1984. Again, only 27% of fathers had taken leave. This study allowed comparisons within couples in terms of usage of parental leave; it was discovered that only 14% of fathers who took leave took as much leave as did their partners.*

* defined as having taken 40% or more of all days of leave taken by the couple

The low participation of fathers in this program contrasts sharply with their participation in other parental insurance programs. Swedish parents are allowed a generous number of paid sick days to care for ill children, and almost half of all the sick days taken by Swedish workers to care for sick children are taken by fathers. Fathers also tend to take advantage of "daddy days" - ten days with pay immediately following childbirth. Eighty-five percent of fathers take this leave, for an average of 8 days. Fathers' participation in the year-long leave program has slowly increased since the program's inception in 1974 - only 2% of fathers took leave in 1975, compared to 27% today. Still, it seems likely to take several decades to reach full participation of fathers in this program.

Who takes parental leave, and why?

Given the low participation rate why is it that so few Swedish fathers avail themselves of parental leave? By law, an employer must guarantee an employee the same or an equivalent job after a leave. For the first nine months of the leave, compensation is made at 90% of private employees' salaries, and at 100% for most of those in the public sector. (There is, however, an income ceiling on compensation, which limits payments to men who earn substantially over median income.) In other words, easily identified structural obstacles to men leaving work to do childcare, which exist in other countries like the United States, are not present in Sweden. We have to look deeper for hidden external obstacles as well as "internal" obstacles, rooted in traditional attitudes and sex-role socialization practices.

In the 1986 Gothenburg survey, a variety of external and internal factors were found to be associated with the likelihood of a man taking parental leave. In terms of external factors, men who took parental leave received considerable social support for their decision from friends and parents. They also tended to know other male workers who had taken parental leave.

At the workplace, leavetakers felt that their employers, supervisors and co-workers were positive toward their taking time off, and that the conditions of the job allowed them to be away for a time. Men who had taken leave were more likely to work in the public sector, where compensation levels were higher, but surprisingly, where attitudes were not any more positive toward their leavetaking than were found in the private sector.

At home, men who took leave tended to live with certain kinds of women - these women supported their partners' leavetaking (only a minority of women did), and these women had had working mothers as role models as they were growing up. These women also tended to have high education, and prestigious jobs with good incomes, that they were presumably looking forward to keeping and returning to.

In the area of internal factors, men who took parental leave paid more attention to new images of fatherhood presented in the debate on parental leave in the mass media and rejected the notion that men should be the primary breadwinner. Their high education levels probably played a role in their attentiveness to social debate and their rejection of traditional sex-role stereotyping.

The ultimate goal of Swedish sex-role policy is a society where men and women share equally the responsibilities of childcare. Along this line, "success" would come when men share parental leave equally with their partners. As mentioned above, very few Swedish fathers share parental leave equally with mothers. What factors seemed to be responsible for men sharing a greater proportion of the leave?

Several decisive factors associated with leavetaking were also found to be significantly correlated with the length of leave taken. Having the support of friends and co-workers, having a job perceived as flexible enough to leave, attentiveness to the parental leave debate, belief in breadwinning as a shared responsibility of men and women and being highly educated were all associated with men taking a bigger percentage of all leave days taken by the couple.

In addition, men who had taken a greater proportion of the leave were more likely to reject the notion of success as a goal for men, have lower incomes (for which they would be almost fully compensated), have fathers themselves who had not participated in their upbringing, and live with women with a certain profile: their fathers had been active participants in childcare, they regarded themselves as family breadwinners, they did not want to leave their jobs for as long as a year, and they believed strongly that men were as capable as mothers at caring for children's needs.

Several factors were unexpectedly not associated with fathers' leavetaking or the proportion of leave fathers took. In general, men felt that men were as capable as women at taking care of children; men who didn't take leave and men who took only a very short leave were no less likely than other men to report this attitude. As a group, fathers were fairly satisfied with the jobs they held before the child was born; men who took leave or who took a long leave were no more likely than other men to express job dissatisfaction. Men in "white-collar" jobs (administrative and technical positions) were no more or less likely than men in "blue-collar" jobs (crafts and factory occupations) to take leave or stay home longer. Finally, older fathers were as inclined as younger fathers to take leave.

Barriers to fathers' participation in parental leave.

What then were the barriers to full utilization of parental leave? The most important may be attitudes toward the man as breadwinner. As long as men and women see men (rather than men and women) as responsible for the family's economic support, men's energies and interest will be directed toward occupational pursuits outside the home and away from childcare. Attitudes toward men as breadwinners are developed early, and through every agent of socialization - the mass media, parents, peers, schools. Since the process of sex role transmission is often subtle and even unconscious, it would appear to take a monumental resocialization effort to counter the development of traditional attitudes toward men as breadwinners.

Moreover, for men to be relieved of being primarily responsible for family income, women would have to be willing to give up their current freedom to choose whether or not to be employed outside the home. Girls would have to be socialized to accept the responsibility for income-earning if they were to be able to take their place alongside men as family providers. Such deep-set attitude change probably takes generations to accomplish.

Another considerable obstacle originated in the workplace. Many employers and supervisors are negatively predisposed to considering men as active fathers, and many jobs are structured in ways that make it difficult for occupants to take an extended period off. Men, apparently, are also led by the culture and the employer to believe that they are indispensable at the workplace.

Last, but not least, the investment by women in the mothering role has proved to be a significant barrier to men participating in childcare. Wanting themselves to stay home, women in the study apparently discouraged their partners from taking very much leave. Holding on to their traditional domain may continue, until women feel more comfortable in pursuing other interests, particularly occupations outside the home.

The potential of social policy for effecting sex-role changes.

Can social policy be used to increase fathers' participation in childcare? Providing the opportunity to take leave during the child's first year of life seems an important step, but others must follow if equal responsibility for childcare is to become a reality.

Support groups could be established for men contemplating and taking parental leave. Such groups could be organized through the parental centers or the well-baby clinics that now routinely provide parental education in Sweden. This study showed how important role models and social support are for men taking parental leave.

Educational effort could be directed toward employers and supervisors to enlighten them about the benefits to be gained for society if fathers became increasingly involved in their children's lives. Even direct economic benefits for employers could be mentioned: fathers who have taken time off may come back to work more refreshed; having another important responsibility in the form of childcare may develop men's organizational abilities; shortening the amount of time women take off at childbirth could improve their promotion potential and raise their interest in employment. Personnel officers could be trained to help employees plan ahead for a period of parental leave, so that such leavetaking would not hurt the organization or jeopardize the individual's chances of advancement.

The income ceilings of the parental leave benefit could be removed and the percentage of compensation raised to 100% for all employees to remove any economic disincentives associated with higher-income earning men taking time off. Such regulations currently appear to have the effect of reducing the amount of time taken by men who otherwise are predisposed to sharing parental leave with their partners.

Prospects for the future

What prospects are there for the future that more Swedish fathers will elect to stay home to take care of infants?

Since age had no significant bearing on leavetaking in this study, we cannot presume that eventually natually, an egalitarian pattern of parenting will become pervasive in Sweden. It seems likely that the trend toward more fathers participating in parental leave will continue, but on a very slow basis.

More men will probably take parental leave in the future inspired by the current group of pioneering fathers. Not very many fathers have taken leave, but those who have serve as contemporary models for those contemplating staying home for childcare purposes. Knowing someone who had taken parental leave proved to be a powerful determinant for men taking parental leave, as was being exposed to new images of fatherhood in the mass media. A snowball effect may gradually lead to a larger group of fathers who have tried parental leave because they know others who have done it. It is difficult to break with the current of tradition and social opinion - knowing or hearing of others who have deviated from the typical pattern can make it much easier for an individual to adopt a new lifestyle. This study shows that men depend on role models and the emotional support of those close to them to be able to adopt a new parenting arrangement.

The other social forces that might lead to more men taking parental leave in the future relate to the work attitudes and employment situation of women. Study results showed that having a working mother was a crucial factor in women's tendency to share parental leave with their mates. Clearly, most women felt that having a working mother was positive, and worthy of emulation. They felt better about going back to work if their own mothers had been in the labor market, and this opened the way for the fathers to participate in baby care. As time goes on, increasing numbers of women will have had working mothers, so we could expect that increasing numbers of Swedish fathers will have the opportunity to stay home to do childcare.

Another social force that might propel more men into taking parental leave is the improving economic opportunities of women. As women gain greater access to higher status, higher-paying jobs, they seem more interested in men taking on a greater share of the responsibility for childcare.

Summary

In summary, the Swedish experience suggests that traditional exclusion of men from childcare is highly resistant to change. Policymakers can give men opportunities to participate more in childcare from the very beginning of their child's life, but many will not take advantage of these opportunities. While some structural obstacles to leavetaking appear to exist (in the form of inflexible jobs, intolerant employers, and restrictions on income compensation) adherence to traditional sex-role attitudes seems to be an even more important reason why mothers are still responsible for childcare in Sweden. Clearly, it is not just men who are content with the status quo, but women, too, are still most comfortable with a situation where they are the ones primarily responsible for childcare. If equality is still so far off in Sweden, a society ideologically committed to it, we can expect to see the persistence of the sexual division of labor in other post-industrial societies for some time to come.

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( ) SWEDISH WOMEN ON THE MOVE by Birgitta Wistrand, 1981.

( ) THE SWEDISH CHILD CARE LEAVE ACT by the Ministry of Labour, January, 1985.

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( ) THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE MALE. Summary of a report by the Working Party for the Role of the Male. Ministry of Labour, 1986.

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